

# Higher Education In India: Challenges And Prospects

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## ABSTRACT

The research paper 'Higher Education in India : Challenges and Prospects' endeavors to probe into the problems of higher education in India in the context of globalization. The paper discusses the various issues which need to be addressed urgently if India has to make rapid strides in the field of education. The data was collected from secondary sources for analysis and study. The data shows that the amount of spending in this sector has not increased commensurate with the global standards and needs . There is a need to involve the industrial houses in helping to build infrastructure, providing guidance, skill building and funding as a part of their corporate social responsibility. The objective of the paper is to study the problems in higher education in India, especially after globalization and the entry of the private sector in higher education and examine some plausible solutions to improve the quality, affordability and availability to those who deserve it. The requirements of higher education cannot be wholly be met by the Government. However, the Government's presence is very crucial to facilitate the implementation of the equity and inclusive growth principles. An increased and active role of the private sector is inevitable, it is necessary to encourage research, vocational courses and provide high-quality education. It is necessary to expedite steps to make teaching an attractive career in order to attract the best talent. It is equally important to improve the quality of college education at the undergraduate level, which will have a direct impact on the quality and caliber of students opting for entry into institutions of excellence in higher education. There is a need for greater coordination of activities and the Government as well as the private institutions can co-exist and mutually support to fill in the gaps in higher education as in the case of countries like USA. For equity and social considerations, the Government can initiate schemes to include the economically backward and other disadvantaged students in the ambit of quality education. While allowing public- private participation, the Government should guide, regulate and monitor the growth of the institutions of higher learning to improve quality. The quality of teaching, learning and research needs to be upgraded if India is to evolve as a world class educational hub.

**Keywords :** Gross Enrolment Ratio, Higher Education, Private Participation, Quality of Education, University Grant Commission (UGC)

**JEL Classification :** I25

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the essential ingredients to a nation's progress towards development is the state of its higher-education system. Quality, equality and excellence in education are the watchwords of a progressive economy. Skilled and educated manpower enables a country to develop fast. In the era of globalized education, it is imperative to foster the growth of higher educational institutions, since they provide specialized human capital, which is crucial for reaping the benefits of globalization, besides its increased relevance for research and development. "Higher education is no longer a luxury; it is essential to national, social and economic development" (UNESCO- 2000). India is endowed with a rich history of qualified professionals and skilled manpower that has proven its mettle in every field, whether it is medicine, engineering or nuclear science. The big boom triggered by India's service led growth, which transformed India's image as a competent country in knowledge-based export and other services, is a testimonial of our country's huge potential and talent, which needs to be tapped. It is estimated that India spends more than 4 billion annually to send its children abroad for higher education and technical training. Therefore, India can hope to emerge as a global hub for higher education. Hence, it makes sense to build on our strengths and streamline policies to give a boost to higher education.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To examine the underlying issues and problems faced by the higher education sector in India.
- 2) To explore ways of making higher education a tool of empowerment for the country's youth.
- 3) To study the challenges and opportunities of higher education in India in the context of globalization.
- 4) To study the increasing role of private sector in higher education in India.

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5) To suggest plausible solutions in the light of various policy changes and developments in the field of higher education.

Data was collected from secondary sources and various Government Reports like the Report of the Working Group on Higher Education, various volumes of Education in India. The analysis has been helpful in understanding the basic issues in higher education that need to be tackled urgently so that pragmatic solutions can be arrived at, and measures initiated.

## HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

The higher-education system in India is presently based on the framework of the Principles of the National Knowledge Commission, Yashpal Committee and the 11th plan document. In a federal polity, education is a concurrent subject, and the Government has to take care of all levels of education. Universalization of primary education, technical education and non- formal education is no doubt important for a country like India. Higher education is equally important and relevant in the globalized era. India had an uninterrupted history of modern universities since 1857 and the Universities of Calcutta, Mumbai and Madras were founded. But over the last three decades, our university system has languished, whereas the Chinese have rebuilt theirs. In 2000, the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education, which is a measure of the number of individuals going to college as a percentage of college-age population was 8% in China and 10 % in India. In 2008, the rate increased to 23% in China whereas in India, it went up to only 13%. The GER in Brazil, Russia and China was 31.5% in 2008 (University World News, 2008) . The GER in developed countries is 71.6%. College and university education is beyond the reach of many talented Indian students. The comparison with China is particularly relevant, since China's higher education system was completely wiped out by Mao Zedong during the cultural revolution of 1966-68. In spite of the upheavals in China, two Chinese universities are listed among the top 100 universities in the world, with University of Peking ranking 47th and Tsinghua University ranking 54th. In spite of our country's long tradition of university education, not a single Indian university made it to the list. Though we can take pride in premier institutions like the IIT and the IIMs, which are centers of excellence in learning, they are not full-fledged universities. The student-teacher ratio is very high in India, with one teacher per 26 students as compared to 13.6 to one in Brazil, 11 to one in Russia and 13.5 to one in China (Chandra and Sharma, 1996). Higher education in India has evolved in distinct and divergent streams, with each stream monitored by an apex body indirectly controlled by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The 433 universities are mostly funded by the state Governments. However, there are 40 important universities called Central Universities, which are maintained by the Union Government and due to their large funding, they have an edge over the others ([academics - india.com](http://academics-india.com)) . The engineering education and the business schools are monitored and are accredited by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), while medical education is monitored and accredited by the Medical Council of India; agriculture education and research is monitored by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research. The National Council for Technical Education (NCTE) controls all the teacher-training institutions in the country. The UGC receives both plan and non - plan grants from the Central Government to carry out the responsibilities assigned to it by law. The details of the grants provided by the Government during the 10th plan - under plan and non plan grants- is presented in the Table 1 given below.

| Table 1 : Plan And Non Plan Grants                         |                         |                          |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Year   | Plan (₹ Crores)         | Non Plan                 |
| 2001-02  | 559.76                  | 1100.00                  |
| 2003-04  | 516.75                  | 1132. 30                 |
| 2004-05  | 719. 75                 | 1182. 85                 |
| 2005-06  | 374.41 ( up to 31-8-05) | 609. 17 ( up to 31-8-05) |
| Source: Working group on Higher Education, Ministry of HRD |                         |                          |

It is obvious that there was no perceptible increase in plan or non plan allocation for higher education. The total plan allocation for the Ministry of Human Resource Development during the 11th plan was ₹ 2, 69,873 crores, of which ₹ 1, 84,930 crores was for the Department of School Education and Literacy and ₹ 84,943 crores for the development of

higher education ([academics.india.com](http://academics.india.com)) . This constituted a 4.6 fold increase over the expenditure of about ₹ 58,820 crores incurred during the 10th plan and 19.4% of the overall central plan allocation. This is a very positive and encouraging step, since it is high time India took some concrete measures to confront the challenges of globalization. The increased allocation was meant for the expansion of existing institutions, opening of new institutions and improvement in the quality of education. According to Sukhdeo Thorat, “Expansion and inclusiveness are the keys to tackle the challenges of higher education in the country” . The 11th Five year plan accorded top priority to increase the number of universities, colleges and vocational and technical institutions for the expansion of higher education. It also emphasized the need to enable access for weaker sections to higher education and include them in the main stream. The 11th plan also had an ambitious target to enroll 21 million students in higher education by 2012 for which

| <b>Table 2 : Current and 11th Plan Enrolment Rates Based On SES and Census Data</b>   |                  |                        |   |                        |  |                                |
|---|------------------|------------------------|---|------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Year  | Academic Year    | Population 18-23 Years | Total Higher Education Enrolment Based on SES | Total GER based on SES | Total Higher Education Enrolment Based on SES Data | Total GER Based on Census Data |
|   | <b>Base Year</b> |                        |   |                        |  |                                |
| 2006  | 2006-07          | 132243                 | 13934   | 10.5                   | 20666  | 15.6                           |
|   | <b>11th Plan</b> |                        |   |                        |  |                                |
| 2007  | 2007-08          | 135440                 | 15034   | 11.1                   | 22212  | 16.4                           |
| 2008  | 2008-09          | 138318                 | 16460   | 11.9                   | 23929  | 17.3                           |
| 2009  | 2009-10          | 141257                 | 18222   | 12.9                   | 25850  | 18.3                           |
| 2010  | 2010-11          | 144259                 | 20341   | 14.1                   | 27986  | 19.4                           |
| 2011  | 2011-12          | 144287                 | 22365   | 15.5                   | 29723  | 20.6                           |
| Source: Draft Report of Working Group on Higher Education for the 11th Five Year Plan |                  |                        |   |                        |  |                                |

| <b>Table 3 : The Share of Higher Education Expenditure In GDP</b>       |          |
|---|----------|
| Year  | % of GDP |
| 1981-82   | 0.38     |
| 1985-86   | 0.42     |
| 1990-91   | 0.36     |
| 1995-96   | 0.37     |
| 1990-00   | 0.47     |
| 2001-2002   | 0.43     |
| Source : Analysis of budgeted expenditure on education - various issues |          |

| <b>Table 4 : Role of The Centre And The State In Financing Higher Education (%)</b> |        |       |
|---|--------|-------|
| Year  | Centre | State |
| 1980-81   | 20     | 80    |
| 1985-86   | 20     | 80    |
| 1990-91   | 21     | 79    |
| 1995-96   | 18     | 82    |
| 1996-97   | 17     | 83    |
| 1998-99   | 26     | 74    |
| 99-2000   | 27     | 73    |
| 2000- 01  | 25     | 75    |
| 2001-02   | 19     | 81    |
| Source : Analysis of budgeted expenditure on education - various issues             |        |       |

the annual growth rate will have to be 15% instead of 10%. The extent of higher education is usually measured by the enrolment rate in higher education. Three alternative methods are used to estimate the extent of access to higher education, namely Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) and Enrolment Eligible Ratio (EER). The Working Group for Higher Education for the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan projected a growth of GER based on SES (Selected Educational Statistics) from current 10.5 to 15.5 by the end of the plan period as well as based on Census data from 15.6 to 20.6 by the end of the plan. The projection based on enrolment in the base year 2006-07 is depicted in the Table 2.

The Table 3 shows the relatively low allocation of GDP to the promotion of higher education over the years, though the situation has shown some improvement in recent years. Against these figures, Brazil spends 0.91% of its GDP on higher education. The share of GDP committed to higher education is much higher at 1.88% in Canada, 1.41% in the US, 1.19% in Australia and 1.07% in UK (University World News, 2008) . The Table 4 makes it amply clear that States have been funding higher education in India, though with globalization and increased demand for education, the private sector participation has become inevitable.

## THRUST AREAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

❖ **The Role of Vocational Education :** Vocational education has emerged as an important branch of higher education in India. A number of public and private polytechnics and vocational institutions exist, which are supervised by the Councils in each discipline. More than 10 million students are enrolled in about 6500 institutions catering to vocational training. This is a very pragmatic approach to the creation of productive employment avenues (Ramanjaneyulu, 2011) .

❖ **Research and Development :** Research and Development is the cornerstone of higher education. Many Centres of Research and Centres of Advanced Studies and Inter University Research Centres of high standards have been set up. These institutions are meant to provide quality inputs in higher education and research areas. The scope for R&D has widened, and a number of International firms have set up R&D centres in India. Even Indian companies have started to increase their R&D budget. Thus, the demand for researchers has gone up, which can be met through more investment in higher education.

❖ **Open University System :** For encouraging distance learning, India has developed an Open University system. This is a very cost-effective and convenient way of imparting higher education. In fact, distance learning combined with the new communication technology offers flexibility and efficiency as well as effective dissemination of knowledge and information. Indira Gandhi National Open University and seven other Open Universities are successfully helping students who seek admission to more than 500 courses. With the internet and satellite technology, distance education will serve the educational needs of many working professionals in our country.

❖ **The Sources of Income For Higher Education :** In India, higher education remained mainly a state-funded activity with about three-quarters of the expenditure being borne by the Government. Higher education funding is mainly from three sources, i.e., Government, fee income from students and other sources of income from philanthropy, industry, sale of publication, etc. The Table 5 reveals the fact that the relative shares of the non -government sources

| Table 5 : Sources of Income For Higher Education |            |      |        |           |
|--|------------|------|--------|-----------|
|  | Government | Fees | Others | ₹ In Crs. |
| 1950-51  | 49.4       | 36.8 | 13.8   | 114.38    |
| 1960-61  | 53.5       | 34.8 | 11.7   | 344.38    |
| 1970-71  | 61.0       | 25.5 | 13.5   | 1118.28   |
| 1980-81  | 72.8       | 17.4 | 10.8   | 3766.71   |
| 1986-87  | 75.9       | 12.6 | 11.5   | 9011.98   |
| Source: Education In India, Vol. II (S)          |            |      |        |           |

such as fees and voluntary contributions have been declining. In fact, reliance on Government sources doubled from 49.4 % in 1950-51 to 75.9 % in 1986-87. At the same time, the fee income showed a marked decline from 36.8% to 12.6%.

The financial allocation for higher and technical education over the five-year plans shows a declining trend. The financing for different levels of education was unbalanced. The role of the private sector has gone up since the introduction of macroeconomic reforms in India.

## **PUBLIC FUNDING VERSUS PRIVATE INITIATIVES**

Though the private sector is bound to play an increasing role in higher education, Government funding and role in higher education are essential for the sustained progress of countries. Moreover, long-term returns accrue from basic research and technological development. Various universities are concerned with the problem of financing of education. The globalization process also led to changes in the methods and philosophy of cost recovery measures. The various Committees set up by the UGC for examining the scope of raising income advocated the revision of tuition and other fees. However, the hike in fees may seriously affect the equity principle in higher education. With economic reforms and other pressures of the Government, higher education has been shifted to the list of non merit good from the list of merit good (Rani, 2003).

The new regime under WTO, where competence is the cardinal principle of success in international operations, has made it abundantly clear that the country should exploit its excellent potential in higher education and training to facilitate and prepare itself to export the Indian brand of education to foreign countries. Public funding is not in a position to meet the challenges of expansion and diversification of the higher-education system in the country to meet the continuously growing demands of today's job market (Pathak, 2010). There is no option but to bring in private initiatives in a massive way to meet the various challenges. The deregulatory mechanism of controls started with the granting of autonomous status to colleges since 1970s. Some of the colleges graduated to the status of "Deemed University". There is no denying the fact that financing is the key problem confronting the higher-education system in India. With the limitations imposed by the tight central and state government budgets and the pressures to cut fiscal deficit at all levels, the Government is forced to restrict deployment of funds for higher education. As per the new policy direction, "user pays" principle is applied through hike in fees and introduction of self-financing courses in tune with liberalization policies. However, it is a fact that too much reliance on self-financing courses can adversely affect equity and quality of higher levels of education in the long run. Too much dependence on financing led to an acute shortage of teachers and researchers in basic disciplines in the U.K. From the point of view of the welfare of the society at large, private investment will not suffice. There is a danger of denying opportunities to meritorious students from economically backward groups. To overcome this problem, student loan programmes have been introduced in developing and developed countries to safeguard poor students from rising costs of higher education. Even then, equitable cost recovery will be possible only with scholarships. Availing of loans may pose a problem due to imperfections in the capital market and lack of collateral security. Moreover, changes in the economic reform policies have resulted in an increase in the rate of interest on the loans for students also. Therefore, the student-loan scheme must be tailored to comply with equity concerns.

## **PRIVATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The days when higher education was a matter of national policy and increased Government regulation are rapidly fading. In modern times, higher education is globalized and commercialized, where the role of the state has vastly diminished (Kaul, 2006). Private initiatives in higher education have been forthcoming in a big way in view of the increased demand and also lured by huge and quick profits. A number of factors were responsible for the rapid growth of private higher education in India. Conventional university courses were insufficient to meet the demands of the market. The lack of academic flexibility led to increased private initiatives in higher education. The private sector readily responded to the market demand and was able to design short term courses, which were job oriented. A number of job oriented programmes increased the popularity of the private institutions. Privatization of education in India has emerged in several forms like self-financing in Government Institutions. Another is converting government aided private institutions into private self-financing institutions, and yet another form is allowing expansion of self-financing private institutions or commercial private institutions with or without recognition to operate.



Commercial private education is pragmatic since it gives importance to industrial training and offers vocational courses. The course structure is designed to cater to specific job requirements. The 1990s witnessed mushrooming of commercial higher-education institutions, which were charging a capitation fee (University World News - India, 2008). Another area of grave concern for higher education is that universities are finding it increasingly difficult to retain and recruit top quality teachers for maintaining high quality in education. The faculty is weak in private institutions, and they rely on part-time faculty or guest faculty working at public universities. The meager salaries are unable to attract talented, trained teachers with academic expertise. Thus, for the students, paying high fees for education was no guarantee for good education. In India, the fees charged are exorbitant and the students are supposed to make full payment. In countries like USA, 30-40% of the recurring cost of education is recovered from the students and 60-70 % is generated from endowments, alumni and other sources (Rani, 2005).

Poor funding, lack of quality and the requisite number of teachers have affected the enrolment of students in higher education in India. The rationale of the Government's relatively less commitment to higher education was the conviction that the Government should focus on the elementary and secondary education and leave higher education to the private sector. The economically and socially backward sections could be taken care of by loans. At present, there is a dearth of schemes catering to the needs of economically backward meritorious students. There is a need to examine the possibility of funding these students, though scholarships may take care of a part of the expenses. The loan schemes offered by the banks should be soft loans, since the rates are now market determined. Increased role of market can be a deterrent to the entry of meritorious students from economically backward groups, minorities, etc. Commercialization and market fixed fees can crowd out important educational duties and opportunities (UNESCO, 2000). The problem with private education in India is the lack of efficiency, which makes it different from countries like USA, where the important dimensions of complementarities and competition give a boost to private education as well as public education. If private institutions have to deliver results in higher education, there is a heightened need to make these institutions more efficient and competent. High fees, poor faculty and related problems are plaguing these institutions, which are mushrooming in India. The absence of well defined, realistic, well - coordinated and pragmatic policies and approach has undermined the potential growth of higher education in India (Panagariya, 2010). There is a need to regulate and coordinate the growth of private and public institutions dealing with higher education, which has prevented India from realizing the goals of higher education. Too much dependence on student fees, inflexible student-loan schemes and privatization at the cost of quality has undermined the progress of higher education in India. There is an urgent need to include the economically backward bright students in higher education. Loans on easier terms, liberal repayment facilities, and subsidized interest rates are needed if India is to surge ahead in becoming a premier educational hub.

## **MEASURES TO STRENGTHEN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The real challenge in higher education in India is to expand capacities in higher education to keep up with the rising domestic and global demand for skilled manpower. The emergence of India as a knowledge-based service driven economy has made its human capital its major strength. However, it is necessary to translate its strength into action by a proper coordination of the public and private sector. It is high time we come to terms with the reality of the Government's limitations in bringing about quality education from its resources. There is a need for private sector participation. To attract quality private participation, it is essential to allow the investors a reasonable and legitimate return on their investment. The Government can put in place a regulatory mechanism to oversee the functioning of both public and private sector institutions. Excessive commercialization of higher education should be controlled. There is a need to involve the industrial houses in helping to build infrastructure, providing guidance, skill building and funding as a part of their corporate social responsibility (Pathak, 2010).

The industries can share responsibility by helping in skill building and training. This will increase the employability of the students. Public- private partnerships in education are sure to bridge the gaps in higher education. In a country like India, where a large number of students are denied opportunities for good-quality education, it is necessary to identify deserving potential students and empower them by initiating them into higher education so that they get the deserving jobs. It is imperative to bring in the principles of equity and inclusiveness in higher education. The multiple disparities based on caste, region, gender, economic and social status in higher education is a matter of grave concern. It is crucial to formulate group specific policies to bring the deprived groups at par with the others. To provide

opportunities to deserving students, scholarships and soft loans should be made available, since an educational loan in India adds to the burden of the family. Though privatization is inevitable, there should be a strong network of State Universities along with Private Institutions as in the case of U.S. Government can initiate schemes to include the economically backward and other disadvantaged students in the ambit of quality education. Under WTO, foreign universities will be entering India to set up independent operations or collaborations with the existing Indian institutions and colleges. Hence, it is necessary to strengthen our system to meet the challenges. Though the 11th plan allocation for higher education has increased five fold as compared to the 10th plan, the allocation for research is less than 1% as compared to the developed countries, which devote 3% of the GNP for research-related activities. It is necessary to increase the allocation and ensure that the same is utilized in research of high quality, which will facilitate the much-needed value addition and innovation in all areas, especially science, engineering, pharmaceuticals and medicines. Another area of genuine concern in India is poor quality of most of the educational institutions, which is reflected by the poor standards of the pass outs as compared to international standards. In India, there are a few centres of learning like the IITs and the IIMs which produce students of very high standards. Most of the institutions are mediocre or even poor in terms of intellectual resources, training and infrastructure. There is an urgent need to bring about a change and transform these institutions into centres of excellence in learning, if India is to meet the challenges of globalization. Equally important is the need to upgrade and strengthen the undergraduate system, which is suffering from gross neglect. University and college education are actually catchment areas for the upper level specialized institutions to emerge as institutions of excellence. There is a need to involve the industrial houses in helping to build infrastructure, providing guidance, skill building and funding as a part of their corporate social responsibility. The teacher's role is that of a facilitator and has to work towards creating a learning environment. The teachers also should be ready to update and equip themselves with new technology and approach, in order to be more effective in creating and nurturing talent and skills of the students. For this, the teachers need to be equipped with new pedagogical skills, and the teachers need to be encouraged to research more in their areas of specialization. At present, the teaching jobs are not attracting the best talent in India due to factors like poor pay and other disincentives. It is necessary to attract talent into teaching and inject dynamism in the teaching and learning process.

## CONCLUSION

Increased investment in higher education is vital for nurturing and developing human capital, which is the hallmark of a progressive economy. Investing in quality education is also an integral part of the development agenda for a country. This is particularly relevant and true for India, which holds a vantage position with regard to its knowledge-based exports. The Government allocation of funds for higher education in India is meager compared to the needs and also in comparison with countries like Brazil and China. The Gross Enrolment rate is also miserably low in India. Very few students opt for higher education due to lack of access to funds and difficulties in securing loans at affordable rates of interest. The growth and proliferation of private institutions in higher education driven by profit considerations has led to hike in fees without any quality up gradation. If this trend continues, India may not be able to produce qualified, skilled professionals with expertise, who have to steer the economy to greater heights of excellence. The Government sector may not be in a position to cater to the increased demand for higher education. Hence, entry of the private sector is inevitable. However, it is necessary to control and monitor these institutions to upkeep the objectives of equity and quality. To help meritorious economically and socially backward students, loans at concessional rates can be offered. The industrial sector and other stakeholders of the society can be involved in support activities like imparting training and skill and even funding as a part of the corporate social responsibility.

Public- private partnerships can help to remove the lacunae in the availability and access and lead to a healthy growth of the institutions in higher education. There is a need for greater coordination of activities and the Government as well as private institutions can coexist and mutually support to fill in the gaps in higher education as in the case of countries like USA. For equity and social considerations, the Government can initiate schemes to include the economically backward and other disadvantaged students in the ambit of quality education. While allowing public-private participation, the Government should guide, regulate and monitor.

Distance learning can serve as an effective medium to serve the needs of a large chunk of students desirous of pursuing higher education at reasonable costs. These institutions should be encouraged to offer good-quality programmes in learning at cheap rates. Besides resorting to the distance learning system, it is necessary to adopt new technology in

teaching and learning. Increased use of computers and internet connections should be encouraged, and these facilities should be made easily available. Scientists have already developed cheap computers for students' use, which is a welcome step. Thus, it is essential to expedite steps to improve the quality and accessibility of education to realize the goals of higher education.

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